ABSTRACT

This work is a critical examination on the nature of truth and knowledge, the challenges of fake news and alternative facts to the traditional understanding of truth as objective. Fake news and alternative facts are ways of spreading false information that looks like truth with the intention of deceiving and misleading the observer. However, the concept of simulacra and simulation of reality in Jean Baudrillard explained it well. Though it is very difficult to eradicate the rate fake news and alternative facts spread especially in this era of technological advancement, but to some extent critical thinking, skepticism and media literacy can aid to curtail the spread.

Keywords: Truth, Knowledge, Fake news, Alternative facts, Social media.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The concepts of fake news and alternative facts have become increasingly prominent in our contemporary society. it refers the diffuse of false or misleading information, often through social media, online news sites and other online platforms. However, the spread of false information is not in any way a new phenomenon in our digital world. It has led to a crisis of trust in institutions, media and experts. This crisis has significant implications for our understanding of truth and knowledge, and raises important questions about the nature of truth, the role of power and ideology in shaping our understanding of the world, and the impact of fake news and alternative facts on democratic systems and processes.

This work is a critical examination on the nature of truth and knowledge, the challenges that fake news and alternative facts pose to the nature of truth and knowledge, some factors that contribute or propagate its speedy spread, and some possible solutions to curtail this speedy circulation.

2.0 THE NATURE OF TRUH AND KNOWLEDGE

The nature of truth and knowledge are closely related. Truth is fundamental to human inquiry and understanding, it is a correspondence between language or thought and the ways things actually are. Philosophers have attempted to explain the nature of truth by various theories. The three major dominating theories of truth are: correspondence, coherence and pragmatic theories of truth. Correspondence theory holds that; a statement is true if it is in accordance with reality, coherence theory

on the other hand posit that the truth of a knowledge lies in the statement not on the reality, pragmatic theory is of the view that a proposition is true if what it affirms is practicable or realizable[1]. Knowledge as Plato defined it is justified true belief.[2] The major sources of knowledge as argued by some philosophers are; the empiricist, who holds that knowledge come from sensory experience and observation, the rationalist is of the view that knowledge comes from reason and innate ideas while that of pragmatist holds that knowledge comes from practical experience and experiments.

2.1 THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

The philosophical foundation of truth and knowledge can be traced down to the ancient period especially at the era of Plato. Plato's theory of knowledge and reality is based on the idea that the physical world is only an imperfect reflection of a higher and eternal realm of abstract Forms or Ideas. Plato believed that knowledge is a process of recollection rather than a process of learning.[3] Before birth the soul exists in a realm of abstract Forms, where it has access to all knowledge. Thus, at birth, the soul forgets this knowledge and must recollect it through a process of education and contemplation. However, his analogy of the allegory of the cave and his idea of knowledge are closely related; the prisoners in the cave represent the majority of people who are trapped in a world of appearances and believe that the shadows on the wall are reality. On the other hand, the freed prisoner is the one who has achieved enlightenment and understands the true reality.

During the modern era, it was all about the empiricists and the rationalists who argued respectively that knowledge is gotten from experience and by reason. Immanuel Kant on his view of synthetic *a priori* opined that knowledge is derived from the interaction between human mind and the

1 Hyginus Ezebuilo, *Epistemology at a Glance*, (Awka: Iprogressive Press, 2022), 12-13.

2 Plato, *Theatetus*, trans, Benjamin Jowett (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 20.

3 Plato, *Meno*, trans, Benjamin Jowett, 81C-86C.

external world. Truth for him is a matter of correspondence between our knowledge claims and the ways things actually are in the world.

Nietzsche argue that the traditional notions of truth which are the objectivity of reality known independently of human perspective are based on false premise,[4] he contends that truth is a product of human creativity and perspective. His Will to Power suggest that knowledge and truth are tools for individuals to exert their power and creativity. Thus, truth is not an objective fact but rather a construction of human values and interests. This is consequent to his idea of perspectivism which posit that there is multiple perspective of the world, each with its own truth, in this sense, truth is not a single objective fact but rather a multiplicity of truths, each relative to a particular perspective.

3.0 THE NATURE OF FAKE NEWS AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS

Fake news can say to be false or misleading information that is presented as a factual, often with intention of deceiving or manipulating others.[5] It can take many forms, including false news articles, propaganda and disinformation. However, it is information that is intentionally false or misleading, unverified or unsubstantiated, it is biased or slanted in some ways.[6] By implication, fake news is a deliberate attempt to deceive or manipulate others, it lacks evidence or credible sources, it is an information that presented a particular perspective or agenda. Alternative facts are false or misleading information that is presented as factual, often in contradiction to established facts or evidence.[7] They are used to support a particular ideology, agenda or narrative, and can be used to manipulate public opinion or to prevent and obscure truth.

4 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*, trans, R. J. Hollingdale (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 79-97.

5 Michiko Kakutani, *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*, (New York: Tim Duggen Books, 2018), 12.

6 Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Politics*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004), 30.

7 Ralph Keyes, *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Politics*, 25.

Fake news and alternative facts are related to Jean Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and simulation of reality. A simulacrum is a copy or representation of something that lacks an underlying truth or substance.[8.] Simulacra can take many forms, including images, words and objects, they are not just copies or representations of reality, but also distortions or manipulations of reality. For instance, a photograph of someone is a simulacrum or a representation of the actual person. It can also be manipulated in some way, such as through the use of filters or editing software. Simulation refers to the process of creating and spreading simulacra.[9] It involves the creation of a hyperreal world which is a word that is more real than reality itself. The hyperreal world is a world of simulation, where the distinctions between reality and representation are blurred. For instance, a video game is a simulation of a real-world environment. It creates a hyperreal world more than reality itself, at least for the player.

Social media plays a significant role in spreading fake news and alternative facts due to the viral nature of online content. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram can amplify misinformation, making it difficult to correct. Just as Jurgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere which refers to a space where citizens can engage in rational discourse and debate about matters of public concern.[10] The public sphere is characterized by the free exchange of ideas, the absence of coercion and the pursuit of rational understanding.

3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF FAKE NEWS AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS

1. **Social Constructivism:** This is a philosophical theory developed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann which posits that reality is constructed through social and cultural norms, values and beliefs.[11] It argues that truth is not an objective fact, but a product of collective agreement. The

8 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra et Simulation*, (France: Editions Galilee, 1981), 12.

9 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra et Simulation*, 15.

10 Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989), 12.

11 Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (New York: Double Day Press, 1966), 1-8.

social construction of reality is a process that involves the creation of a shared reality through the interactions of individuals and groups. Fake news and alternative facts can be seen as the actuality of social constructivism, where different groups construct their own reality, often in opposition to other groups.

2. **Perspectivism and Relativism:** According to Nietzsche, all knowledge and truth is relative to individual perspectives, he opined that truth is a product of human creativity and perspective. Relativism suggests that truth is relative to cultural, historical or personal contexts. Nietzsche asserted that, "there are no facts, only interpretations."[12] Fake news and alternative facts rely often on perspectivist and relativist assumptions, presenting information as true from a particular perspective, while regarding a contrary view as false or irrelevant.

4.0 THE CHALLENGES OF FAKE NEWS AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS TO THE NATURE OF TRUTH AND KNOWLEDGE

The traditional notion of truth and knowledge as something objective and independent of human perspective has been challenged in so many ways. Skepticism and relativism are the major philosophical challenge to the traditional understanding of truth and knowledge. Skepticism holds that knowledge is impossible or uncertain, one can never be certain of anything. Relativism is of the view that truth and knowledge are relative to cultural or personal perspective. Thus, truth and knowledge are not objective or absolute. In this contemporary era, where fake news and alternative facts are popularized more than any other thing, our notion of truth and knowledge are at stake. Some of these challenges are;

1. **The Erosion of Trust:** The concept of social solidarity according to Emile Durkheim refers to the bonds that hold society together, it is based on share values, norms and institutions that promote social cohesion.[13] Trust is the fundamental component of social solidarity and

12 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans, W. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1887), 280.

13 Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, (France: Free Press, 1893), 15.

cohesion, as it enables individuals to cooperate and work together towards common goals. Trust also promotes social stability, as it reduces conflict. However, the increase of fake news and alternative facts can erode trust in the institution, media and experts in several ways by; spreading misinformation and disinformation which can weaken the credibility of institutions, media and experts. When trust is eroded, social solidarity and cohesion are compromised which can lead to increase conflict and polarization, decreased cooperation and collaboration.

2. **The Confusion of Reality:** Kant's concept of categorical imperative is a moral principle that is universal, absolute and objective, by implication truth and knowledge are universal, absolute and objective. Clear and distinct knowledge is essential for making informed decision and navigating the world, it is based on reason and evidence rather than opinion and speculation. However, fake news and alternative facts invalidate clear and distinct knowledge and categorical imperative by creating confusion, uncertainty and promote conspiracy theories and misinformation.
3. **The Promotion of Propaganda:** Propaganda is a form of communication that is designed to influence people's attitudes, beliefs or behaviors, it is often used to promote a particular ideology, political agenda and what have you. Propaganda is characterized by biased or one-sided information, emotional appeals, simplification and exaggeration, repetition and reinforcement. Propaganda shares the same characteristics with fake news and alternative facts. However, fake news and alternative facts promote propaganda by creating an echo chamber, where people are only exposed to information that confirms their existing beliefs which can make it difficult for people to encounter opposing viewpoints. It also lacks fact-checking which can make it difficult to distinguish between true and false information and can promote the spread of propaganda.

5.0 POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO FAKE NEWS AND ALTERNATIVE FACTS

Epistemology plays an important role in the understanding of truth and knowledge, it that branch of philosophy concerned with the nature, sources and limits of knowledge. It provides a framework for understanding the challenges of fake news and alternative facts. It can also help us develop strategies for promoting epistemic virtue and combating the spread of misinformation. This includes the development of media literacy critical thinking and skepticism, as well as the promotion of epistemic humility.

1. **Critical Thinking:** This is a systematic evaluation and analysis of information and ideas to form a judgement or decision. It involves the ability to think reflectively, logically and creatively, and to evaluate evidence and arguments objectively. John Dewey emphasized on the importance of reflective thinking, which involves the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusion to which it trends.[14.]
2. **Media Literacy:** It is the ability to critically evaluate and analyze the media messages and information that we encounter, it involves the ability to identify biases, stereotypes and misinformation, and to evaluate the credibility and reliability of sources. However, the combination of critical thinking and media literacy can aid individual to effectively navigate the challenges posed by fake news and alternative facts.

6.0 EVALUATION

To begin with, the challenges of fake news and alternative facts to the nature of truth and knowledge does not start in this contemporary age, though it is massive now because of the advancement in technology. As asserted *ab initio,* fake news and alternative facts has its root philosophically. Arguing

14 John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process,* (US: D.C Health and Company,1933), 9.

that there is no objectivity of truth, that it is a social or cultural construct and relative perspectives are what gave rise to fake news and alternative facts. Plato, who viewed knowledge as a process of recollection holds that the soul recollects what it forgot through education and contemplation. However, the spreading of fake news according to him is as a form of forgetting or ignorance. Fake news and alternative facts therefore, are ways of obscuring the truth and preventing individuals from recollecting the knowledge that they had access to before birth.

Additionally, considering knowledge as not being an objective reflection of reality but as a product of individual interpretations as Nietzsche opined is by implication asserting that it is impossible to determine what is objectively true or false. Fake news can be seen as one's interpretation among many; a product of individual perspective. Sequel to that, the concept of "the they" (*das man*) in Heidegger also aid in propagating alternative facts. *Das man* refers to the way in which public opinion and social norms can shape our understanding of reality, it is a kind of anonymous, impersonal force that shape our thoughts, feelings and actions. The *das man* is not a specific individual or group but a kind of collective, social entity that influence one's understanding of reality. Fake news and alternative facts which are often created and spread through social media and other online platforms are in other words, spread through the kind of anonymous and impersonal force that Heidegger called "the they".

Consequently, in this postmodern era, truth is no longer seen as an objective or absolute concept, but rather as a social and cultural construct in the sense that truth is subject to multiple interpretations and no single narrative or account can claim to be definite or absolute. Jean-Francois Lyotard's view of postmodern condition refers to the decline of grand narratives that initially provided a sense of unity and coherence to knowledge. However, the multiplication of fake news and alternative facts is a symptom of the postmodern condition, because anyone can produce and spread information, regardless of its accuracy or validity. Thus, knowledge is no longer seen as a fixed or certain body of information, but as a dynamic and constantly evolving process of discovery and interpretation.

7.0 CONCLUSION

Man wants nothing but the truth, he desires the pleasant, life-preserving consequences of truth but most time does not critically access the information he received posed by alternative facts and fake news. The philosophical debates surrounding the nature of truth and knowledge are ongoing and contentious. Some philosophers are of the view that truth is objective and exists independently of human perception, while others argue that truth is subjective and exists only in relation to human perception. However, one can regard fake news and alternative facts as one of the aspects of truth that is subjective.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacra et Simulation*. France: Editions Galilee, 1981.

Berger, Peter. and Luckmann, Thomas. *Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Double Day Press, 1966.

Dewey, John. *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. US: D.C Health and Company,1933.

Durkheim, Emile. *The Division of Labor in Society*. France: Free Press, 1893.

Ezebuilo, Hyginus. *Epistemology at a Glance*. Awka: Iprogressive Press, 2022.

Kakutani, Michiko. *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. New York: Tim Duggen Books, 2018.

Keyes, Ralph. *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Politics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On Truth and Lie in a Nonmoral Sense*, Trans. Hollingdale, R. J. London: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Will To Power*, Trans. Kaufmann , W. New York: Vintage Books, 1887.